

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 001873

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA/CAR
NSC FOR SHANNON AND MADISON
LABOR FOR ILAB
TREASURY FOR OASIA-LAMONICA
USDOC FOR 4322/ITA/MAC/WH/CARIBBEAN BASIN DIVISION
USDOC FOR 3134/ITA/USFCS/RD/WH
DHS FOR CIS-CARLOS ITURREGUI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV ELAB DR
SUBJECT: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: HEALTH WORKERS STRIKE - AGAIN

REF: A. REF: (A) SANTO DOMINGO 0537 (NOTAL)

¶B. (B) SANTO DOMINGO 0794 (NOTAL)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A public health workers' strike has virtually shut down outpatient services at Dominican public hospitals for five days beginning March 22, following similar but shorter work stoppages since January. Government, civil society, and the press, while acknowledging a need for better pay and funding at the hospitals, have reacted negatively to the walkout, which is mainly affecting low-income persons who have no access to the private health care system here. Under the nation's current difficult financial circumstances, the strikers are unlikely to achieve their goals of doubling salaries and alleviating shortages of medical supplies at the hospitals. The strike's economic and political impact is expected to be minimal. End summary.

¶2. (U) Health workers at Dominican public hospitals, operated by the State Secretariat of Public Health and Dominican Social Security Institute, began a five-day nationwide strike March 22, pressing demands for a doubling of salaries and improvements in the hospitals. The strike, led by the Dominican Medical Association (Colegio Medico Dominicano) and other professional groups, involving some 20,000 doctors, 20,000 nurses, 7,000 dentists, plus clinical psychologists, pharmacists, and bioanalysts, shut down outpatient services at all 173 public hospitals except for emergency or critical cases. Thousands of low-income Dominicans who depend on these services will have to postpone their appointments. The strike is the fifth -- and longest -- work stoppage by health workers so far this year. On the first day, strikers carried out the first of various planned peaceful demonstrations in neighborhoods near the hospitals.

¶3. (U) President Mejia threatened to withhold salaries for each day the employees are on strike, and Chamber of Deputies speaker Alfredo Pacheco (of the ruling PRD) threatened to remove a proposed salary increase from the legislative agenda. Opposition PRSC Deputy and bloc leader Victor (Iso) Bisono acknowledged the need to raise taxes to provide additional funding for hospital salaries and supplies, but asserted that the National Congress could not pass any such bill in response to the "blackmail" of a five-day paralization of health services. State Secretary of Public Health Jose Rodriguez Soldevilla (PRD) characterized the strike as inappropriate during an election campaign and the salary demands as excessive in the current economic crisis. Retired Catholic bishop (and main adviser to Cardinal Archbishop Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez) denounced the strike as "senseless, imprudent, heartless, and inconsiderate." Editorials in two major daily papers opposed the strike.

¶4. (U) Following the first health workers' strike January 27, Mejia promised quicker disbursements to alleviate shortages of medicines, supplies, and equipment in the hospitals and suggested that a special commission propose legislation to finance a pay increase (Ref A). The resulting bill, which proposes a tax on alcoholic beverages and tobacco products to finance the increase, has been referred to a Congressional committee. Hospital services continue to suffer from supply shortages.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Health workers, like most Dominicans, have felt severely pinched during the past year between their stagnating incomes, a declining exchange rate, and inflation. That said, the millions of low-income citizens who depend on public health services are unlikely to sympathize with the increasingly disruptive strikes. The public mood has shifted since January, when a 24-hour public health workers' strike was followed by a successful nationwide work stoppage in all sectors (Ref B). Now, less than two months before the presidential election, voters are taking to the streets in campaign rallies, rather than participating in work stoppages or protests. Moreover, middle- and upper-class patients

generally have access to locally available private hospitals, which are unaffected by the latest health workers' strike.

¶ 6. (SBU) The strike has worthy goals, but is unlikely to achieve them in the nation's difficult financial circumstances. The strike's impact on the economy, the government, and the presidential election campaign is expected to be minimal. The public health workers have a history of sporadic walkouts, and the country has learned to put with them, despite the inconvenience and health consequences for low-income patients.

HERTELL